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A Note About Visiting Us

Our exhibits are spread out in several buildings across the NIH campus. At this point in time, the [NIH campus is closed to visitors](#) except for those who are participating in clinical protocols or who have other business on campus. We look forward to welcoming visitors again in the near future.

Highlights

A Short History of the NIH


How NIH grew from a one-room laboratory to become the largest biomedical research agency in the world.

*"Hurry up experiments...
Work—Work—Work."*


Working Out the Code

Nirenberg's method of testing synthetic RNA in a cell-free system was a key technical innovation. Once this technique for decoding the relationship of mRNA to amino acids was publicly announced in 1961, however, there was much more to learn. First, scientists had to determine the exact combinations of nucleotide bases (codons) that specify each amino acid on a protein chain. Second, they had to sequence the order of the bases in the codons to complete the understanding of the genetic code.


For the experiment to work, Nirenberg needed some help from his NIH colleagues in several areas.




Robert G. Martin joined the decoding race at NIH. Robert Martin of the National Institute of Arthritis and Metabolic Diseases (NIAID) joined Nirenberg in his quest to decipher the genetic code. He helped to obtain special synthesized RNA with random combinations of bases.




Drs. Maxine Singer and Leon Heppel provided Nirenberg with synthetic RNAs of defined sequence. More than 20 other scientists and lab technicians helped Nirenberg; they included Philip Leder, C. Thomas Caskey, Melton Benfild, and others.



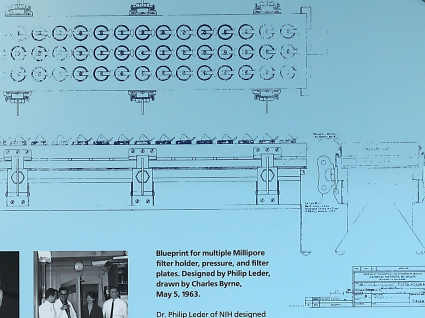
Dr. DeWitt Stetten, Jr., director of NIAID, proudly called this period of collaboration the scientists' "finest hour."



In 1963 Dr. Philip Leder joined Nirenberg's research team to work on the base compositions of codons. Leder's team provided a key breakthrough in the understanding of the genetic code.



Nirenberg and NIH colleagues who helped decipher the code. (Left to right) Dr. W. French Anderson, lab technician



Blueprint for multiple Millipore filter holder, pressure, and filter plates. Designed by Philip Leder, drawn by Charles Byrne, May 5, 1963.

Dr. Philip Leder of NIH designed the multiple Millipore filtration instrument, nicknamed the "multi-plate." With this instrument, up to 45 samples could be filtered before the filters had to be changed. This instrument streamlined the process of determining

NIH was not the only place where scientists carried out studies to decipher the code. Nobel laureate Severo Ochoa and his lab at the New York University School of Medicine also worked hard on the problem. By the end of 1963, both labs had independently identified most of the base compositions of codons but the codon sequences were still unknown. Once Ochoa realized, however, that Nirenberg's lab was well on its way to establishing these sequences, he turned to other interests.

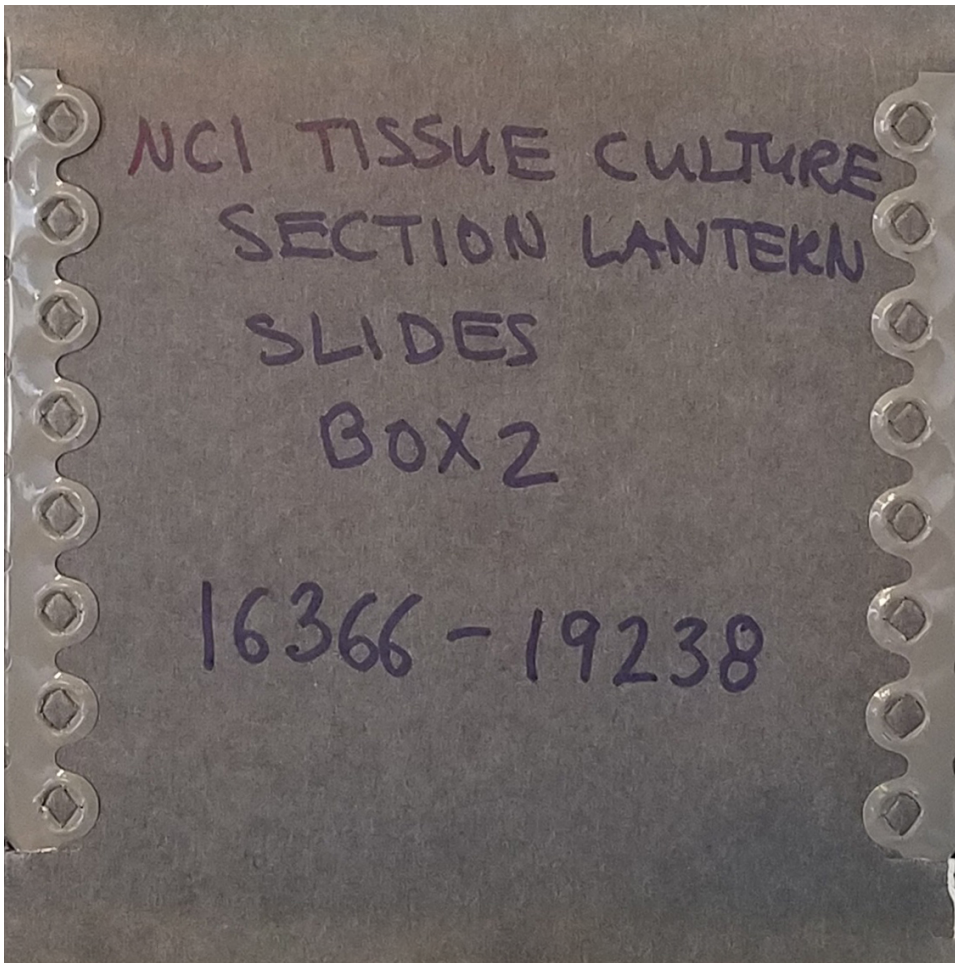
The "coding race" between these two labs fueled exciting collaboration among scientists at NIH who were eager to be the first to finish. Looking back on this period, Nirenberg later remembered, "I worked like hell. I really worked absolutely as hard as I could. It was fun. I enjoyed it."

Multiple Millipore Filtration Instrument, ca. 1964.

Sometimes, discovering new knowledge requires new technologies and new methodologies. To speed up the processing of samples that would potentially reveal nucleotide codon assignments, Dr. Philip Leder, a geneticist at NIH, created this multiple Millipore filtration instrument that could simultaneously filter 45 samples.

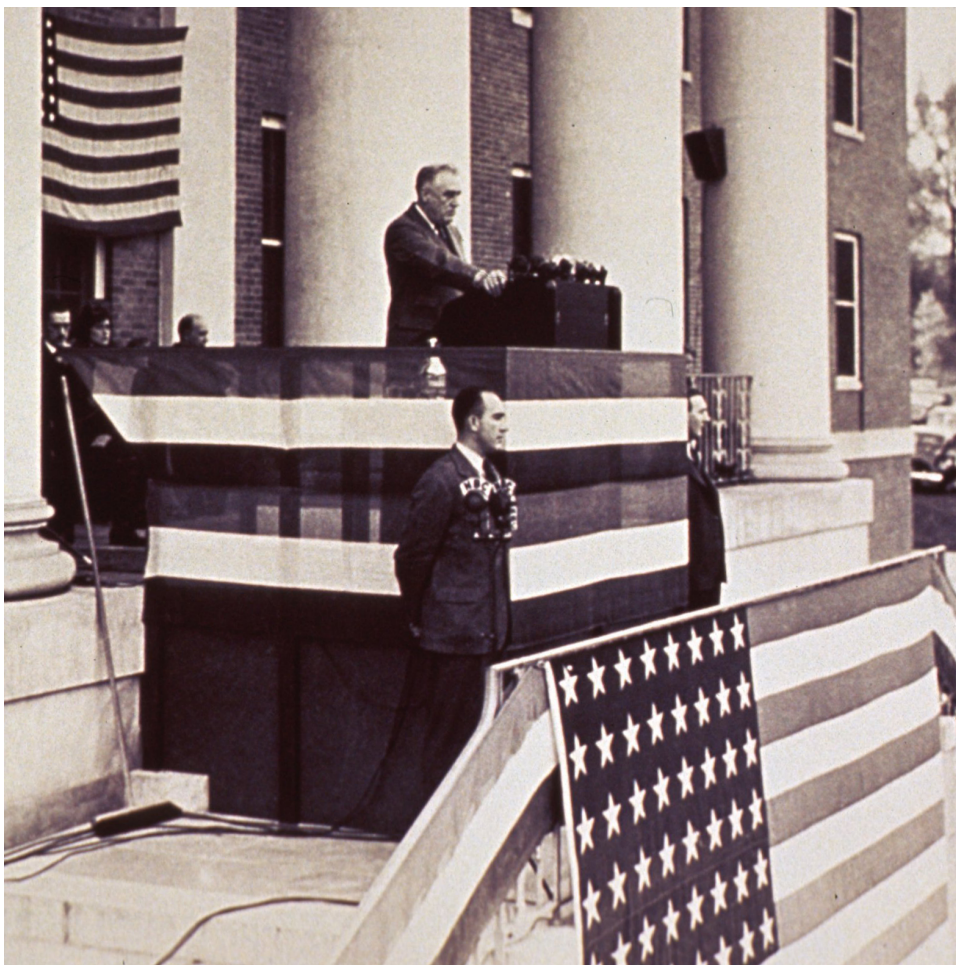
Exhibits

The DeWitt Stetten Jr. Museum of Medical Research, established in 1986, preserves and interprets the material culture of the scientific work of the NIH. In conjunction with the broader Office of NIH History, the Stetten Museum collects biomedical research instruments, photographs, videos, journals, oral histories, and objects related to the general history of the NIH, including architectural artifacts, artwork, and clothing.



Collections

The Office of NIH History and Stetten Museum holds many collections: objects, images, and documents, and books. We have over 3,100 objects and thousands of photographs related to NIH history. There are many ways to search our collections.



Archives

The Office of NIH History and Stetten Museum was established to increase historical understanding of the National Institutes of Health and biomedical science among NIH staff, scholars, and the general public. The Office serves as a source of information for NIH history by maintaining a subject and biographical ready-reference collection.



Canyon Creek Schoolhouse Laboratory 100th Anniversary

In September 1921, state and federal scientists rented a schoolhouse in Montana to set up a laboratory. They worked there only seven years, but what they did made history: created a vaccine for a highly fatal disease; added to our knowledge of diseases carried by ticks; and established the forerunner of the Rocky Mountain Laboratories.



Call for Stories: Behind the Mask

COVID-19 has impacted the NIH community in many ways—from researching and providing information about the disease, developing therapeutics and vaccines, caring for patients in the Clinical Center, and re-configuring how we perform our jobs. The Office of NIH History and Stetten Museum seeks reflections, documents, photographs, and objects about how those at NIH have experienced the COVID-19 pandemic.



Dr. Kim Pelis Named ONHM Director

Dr. Pelis has worked at the NIH for more than 15 years, primarily in the Office of the Director, where she was lead speech writer on the NIH Director's Presentations Team and an editor for the NIH Director's Blog. Kim joins the ONHM with experience in both academic and public history. She earned her Ph.D. in the history of medicine from Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. Prior to coming to the NIH, Kim was an assistant professor of medical history at the Uniformed Services University, across the street from the NIH, from 1998 to 2005.

Observing Native American Heritage Month

This Native American Heritage Month, we want to recognize the history of cooperation and collaboration between NIH and Tribal Nations. On his final day as NIH director – October 31, 2008 – Dr. Elias Zerhouni attended a meeting of the Director's Council of Public Representatives (COPR). Formed in 1998 by former NIH Director Harold Varmus, COPR was composed of members of the public who gave insight on opportunities for public participation and outreach at NIH. During this meeting, committee member Dr. Cynthia Lindquist, Spirit Lake Dakota Nation member and president of Cankdeska Cikana Community College, gifted a star quilt to Dr. Zerhouni. She invited Lora M. Church, a Navajo committee member from the Bitterwater and Black Streak Wood Clan, to sing a song of blessing as Zerhouni stepped down.



From left to right: Lora M. Church, Dr. Cynthia Lindquist, Dr. Elias Zerhouni, and Dr. Raynard Kington, acting director following Zerhouni.

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